

Recovering the "Individual" for Qualitative Research: An Idiographic Approach

Peck, Blake; Mummery, Jane

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Peck, B., & Mummery, J. (2019). Recovering the "Individual" for Qualitative Research: An Idiographic Approach. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 20(3), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-20.3.3231>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more Information see:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Recovering the "Individual" for Qualitative Research: An Idiographic Approach

Blake Peck & Jane Mummery

Key words:

idiographic;
qualitative
research; personal
construct theory;
experience;
George Kelly

Abstract: As detailed examination of the experience of the individual, the *Self* or the *I* is overtaken in the intellectual climate of qualitative research by an aim to understand human experience on a collective or transferable level, the claim made by qualitative researchers to providing genuine understanding of the "what is it like" characteristics of being human arguably becomes shaky. If the wellspring from which we draw our understanding is limited to understandings that researchers recognize as general, then the unique and deeper characteristics of individual experience may be buried within the aggregate. We contend that any such restricted approach cannot begin by itself to cogently inform a theory *of* or a theory *for* examining human experience that is sufficiently sophisticated for qualitative research practice. Consequently, we propose a recovery and inclusion, into qualitative research frameworks, of a strongly idiographic consideration of the "what is it like" characteristics of phenomena, as experienced by the individual person. Recommending thereby a recovery of hermeneutic and phenomenological modes of thought, in this article, we suggest that the central ideas of KELLY's *personal construct psychology* involve fertile ground for guiding such a shift in qualitative research.

Table of Contents

- [1. Losing Track of the Individual](#)
- [2. *Qualia* in Qualitative Research](#)
- [3. Idiographic Dimensions](#)
 - [3.1 The psychology of personal constructs](#)
 - [3.2 The psychology of personal constructs: A considered sketch](#)
- [4. An Elaboration](#)
- [5. Recovering an Idiographic Commitment for Qualitative Research](#)
- [6. Conclusion](#)

[References](#)

[Authors](#)

[Citation](#)

1. Losing Track of the Individual

This article derives from our unease at what might be described as the overtaking of a strongly idiographic perspective within the intellectual climate of qualitative research by a focus on attaining a general understanding of phenomena. As such, this article indicates our considered effort to recover and reinstate a focus on individualized experience and an idiographic perspective within the qualitative enterprise. Beginning from a recognition that each person experiences the world in individual and highly nuanced ways, we suggest that qualitative researchers need to be able to capture and present these idiosyncratic qualities of experience to better understand human experience on a collective or transferable level in rich ways. If we accept this position as a reasonable assertion, it follows that

researchers in the qualitative endeavor need to better engage models for identifying and unpacking the ontological "what is it like" characteristics or the qualities of individual and social experience, as perceived by the individual (AMRINE, ZUCKER & WHEELER, 2012; BRINKMANN, JACOBSEN & KRISTIANSEN, 2014; KNOBLAUCH, 2014; MEY, 2000; SKINNER, VALSINER & HOLLAND, 2001). [1]

Importantly, these assertions and focus are not a signal that qualitative researchers should be purely interested in the individual as such; after all, the research focus may be on the way people more broadly respond to and live with normative value and social structures. Nonetheless, we would say that even such broadly social research focuses rest on the need to ascertain and engage with the individual's qualitative experiences (KNOBLAUCH, 2014; MEY, 2000). Indeed, under the qualitative model, experience of the social should always be informed by—and necessarily ascertained from—individual experience. This is no more than the reminder that the foundations of qualitative research can be traced to medieval philosophers who differentiated *quanta* (the quantities) from *qualia* (the qualities of things), an idea which was carried through into the modern distinction between objective or "primary qualities" open to quantitative study and subjective or "secondary qualities" being the focus of qualitative research (BRINKMANN et al., 2014). According to this distinction, DENZIN and LINCOLN (2017), in their "Handbook of Qualitative Research," define qualitative research as "involving the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials ... that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in *individuals'* lives" (p.8, emphasis added). Underlining this focus on the individual, HOLLOWAY and GALVIN (2016, p.6) suggest qualitative approaches are "linked to the subjective nature of social reality, they provide insights from the perspective of participants, enabling researchers to see events as their informants do, they explore 'the insiders' view'." In other words, the focus for qualitative researchers should be to unpack and represent the everyday, "what is it like" characteristics or qualities of experience and meaning-making (i.e., *qualia*), as perceived or understood at the individual level, as the basis for understanding collective experience. [2]

Despite this foregrounding of such a focus on *qualia* and individualized experience, we suggest that some common qualitatively orientated attempts to represent human experience or *qualia* prioritize the identification of collective or generalizable experience to the detriment of identifying and understanding individualized experience. In this article, we propose an exploration as to what the qualitative research enterprise might look like with the reinstitution of strong commitments to understanding individualized experience. This exploration is an attempt to examine the central principles of George Alexander KELLY's (1955) "Psychology of Personal Constructs," seeing them as a strong exemplar for the recovery and tracing of such commitments and as supporting a productive *entrée* for understanding human being at the level of *qualia*. Before we begin this exploration, however, in the first part of the article, Section 2, we show the relationship between *qualia*, ontological experience, and some common approaches to qualitative research. The second part of the article, Section 3,

comprises our detailed elaboration of the idiographic commitments drawn from the work of KELLY that we suggest could be useful in reorienting qualitative research towards better understanding individualized human experience at the high level of abstraction consistent with *qualia*. We conclude the article through Sections 4, 5 and 6, considering some of the implications of recovery of this idiographic dimension for qualitative research. [3]

2. *Qualia* in Qualitative Research

Recognizing that each person experiences the world in individually nuanced and unique ways, we suggest that the basic consideration of qualitative research involves providing a theoretical account of the relationships between "individuals" and "their reality." In so doing, we capture these inherent idiosyncratic qualities of experience in terms of something unique to that person (and, as we have also noted, even if this is not our primary focus here, something informative for the collective understanding of phenomena). Qualitative researchers aim to unpack the ontological characteristics or the qualities of individual and social experience, as perceived or understood by individuals. This is exemplified by DENZIN and LINCOLN (2017) when they stress the need in qualitative research to explain the circumstances involving the "routine and problematic moments" in the lives of individuals (p.8). Such a focus indicates alignment with LAMIELL (2010) who suggests that to achieve a genuine understanding of the person requires a rich conceptualization of the person as an entity. This means conceptualizing individual persons as intrinsically unique, singular and yet deeply understandable (SALVATORE & VALSINER, 2008). MININNI (2008), furthermore, reminds us that "personal experience is worth to be accurately described not although it should be regarded as 'unique' or 'particular', but quite because it is so" (p.255). [4]

Despite this orientation, a hallmark of contemporary qualitative inquiry is, arguably, "thematic representation" (BENDASSOLLI, 2013; BRAUN & CLARKE, 2006), to the point that HOLLOWAY and TODRES (2003) suggest that even when qualitatively oriented researchers believe they are not conducting a thematic analysis, the attributes of a thematic approach—specifically, its search for generalization—are evident. In such instances, while beginning with the personal and deeply nuanced experiences of the individual, the researchers determine what is important from the dialogical encounter, apply meaning to those statements and then aggregate these meaning units to form a theme that is deemed representative of the participant group and, by association, the individuals within it. The actuality of what is produced, however, is arguably a progressive movement away from a deep and nuanced understanding of the actual individual, towards a generalization which may not be representative of any individual's situation in particular (PECK & MUMMERY, 2017). [5]

Examining this in more detail, the cornerstone of generalization is agreement and is embodied by the identification of aspects considered common across a sample. While accepting the importance of agreement (BARLOW & NOCK, 2009), it follows that if we limit our understanding to only those aspects considered general—more specifically, those aspects that researchers consider

general—then a very limited fragment of our subject matter becomes the focus. Furthermore, what is deemed representative of the many may not constitutively be the case for each individual (ALLPORT, 1962; TOOMELA, 2011). What we are proposing, therefore, is the reinstitution in qualitative research of a deeper consideration of the "what is it like" characteristics of phenomena, as experienced by the individual person, to inform and work alongside the contemporary focus on generalizability. This deeper consideration, as we suggest in the following section, could be informed by idiographic science (MEY, 2000). [6]

3. Idiographic Dimensions

Idiographic science is founded upon the premise that each individual is unique in all respects—genetically, physiologically and psychologically—and ultimately, experiences life in idiosyncratic ways (MOLENAAR & VALSINER, 2008). The dimension of the idiographic position with which we are specifically concerned is what KELLY (1955) refers to as the "inward outlook," as opposed to an "outward inlook" (p.183). Providing a useful conceptualization of the directionality of understanding, the "outward inlook," akin to looking in to something from the outside, represents the perspective of an observer—in this case a researcher—casting a gaze upon another person to develop an understanding. It is the preference given to the "outward inlook" or the observer's gaze that we consider informs—and problematizes—the majority of contemporary qualitative health research. [7]

As has been elaborated by PECK (2015), the judgments necessitated by an "outward inlook" fail to capture the representation of the experiences of individual people. In contrast—borrowing from KELLY's (1963, p.183) idea of an "inner outlook"—we propose as entailing a focus on those inner dimensions of *being* that a person can bring to dialogue in qualitative investigation. The idiographic dimension with which we are most concerned is at the level of the innermost structures of human being. [8]

3.1 The psychology of personal constructs

What we are proposing is drawn from our engagement with KELLY's major work, "The Psychology of Personal Constructs," specifically from his elaboration of a theoretical position from which the psychological domain of the business of being human may be apprehended. We suggest that KELLY's focus upon the psychological functioning of the person means that the principles inherent within his psychology of personal constructs could be the basis for extrapolation in the recovery of idiographic commitments for qualitative research. The following section shows some of the significant theoretical elements of KELLY's psychology of personal constructs and their compatibility with representing the "inner" dimensions of the idiographic perspective. [9]

Ultimately, KELLY, through his psychology of personal constructs, wanted to "give life back to the person who lives it" (p.37). More specifically, informed by his belief "that each man contemplates in his own personal way the stream of events

upon which he finds himself so swiftly born" (p.3), KELLY developed what he called *constructive alternativism*. This was a position founded upon the assumption "that all of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement" (p.15). The philosophical position set forth by constructive alternativism is exemplified by KELLY's fundamental postulate, a theoretical principle showing the remainder of his psychology of personal constructs. KELLY explains that "[a] person's processes are psychologically channelized by the way in which he anticipates events" (p.46). [10]

In elaborating this postulate further, KELLY underscores the commensurate nature of the psychology of personal constructs with an idiographic commitment: "Our first consideration is the individual person rather than any part of the person, any group of persons, or any particular processes manifested in the person's behavior" (p.47). Implicit within the fundamental postulate is the notion that each person creates a series of unique psychological processes, which ultimately determine the way in which an individual person anticipates, makes sense of, and understands the world. It follows, therefore, that if with these self-determined anticipations, the person informs what is ultimately made of the world, and if the individual person creates this anticipatory psychological process, then that same individual can indeed recreate them to anticipate the world in different ways. This self-regulated adjustment in one's anticipations—a person's "inner outlook"—is the hallmark of KELLY's notion of constructive alternativism and the embodiment of the idiographic commitment informing the psychology of personal constructs. [11]

MININNI's (2008) work also exemplifies the domain of idiographic thought with which we are most concerned and with which the psychology of personal constructs is theoretically consistent. In his words, a personal experience should "be accurately described" because it is unique (p.255). Indeed PROCTOR (2011) has suggested that the psychology of personal constructs can be an opportunity to "look carefully at an individual's unique experience," arguing that in so doing "we can be more objectively faithful and detailed in our understanding of that individual's world and experience" (p.34). Also important is the theoretical reflexivity of KELLY's psychology of personal constructs. This is his idea that, to be useful, any theory must be commensurate with what it is that goes on for each of us. In KELLY's (1955) words, a psychological theory must not only "account for itself as a product of psychological processes" (p.39), but, perhaps more importantly, can and should be applicable to our own psychological processes. This is reiterated by McWILLIAMS (2004) who stresses that "I should be able to apply the theory to my own psychological processes and [see] myself reflected in the theory" (p.291). This means pragmatically that the person that the theory envisages must be considered replete with personal agency and, at the same time, embedded in an inherently social world with other people with similar degrees of agency. As the following passage outlines, KELLY (1955) is clearly aware of the need to capture this socially embedded nature of the individual agentic person:

"If a man's private domain, within which his behaviour aligns itself within its own lawful system, is ignored, it becomes necessary to explain him as an inert object

wafted about in a public domain by external forces, or as a solitary datum sitting on its own continuum. If a man's existence in the public domain is ignored, our painstaking acquired knowledge of one man will not help us understand his younger brother, and our daily psychological efforts will yield no increment to the cultural heritage" (p.39). [12]

3.2 The psychology of personal constructs: A considered sketch

The psychology of personal constructs represents a protracted theoretical effort to catch a glimpse of the individual person going about the business of being human. KELLY further contends that the conceptualization of the individual in terms of "man-the-scientist" (p.4) most effectively embodies the business with which individuals concern themselves. More specifically, he asks the reader to afford each individual "scientist"-like characteristics, and to then presuppose that each person develops theories, creates and tests hypotheses, in the pursuit of experimental evidence with which to develop and support a personal understanding of the world. Thus, rather than simply responding to stimuli, each person—with the aspirations of the "everyday scientist"—seeks to predict and control, as well as confirm and disconfirm, aspects of a developing understanding of the world. Any theory or interpretation is, therefore, only ever interim given the possibilities of new evidence. In light of this evidence, be it confirming or disconfirming, each theory can be adjusted accordingly to provide a different interpretation or a new personal theoretical position. For KELLY, the application of the "scientist" metaphor culminates in a question: "Might not the differences between the personal viewpoints of different men correspond to the differences between the theoretical points of view of different scientists?" (p.5) [13]

3.2.1 The construct

These theoretical points of view are what KELLY describes as *constructs*. The following passage from KELLY provides an introductory description of the construct and a foundation for further consideration:

"Man looks at his world through transparent patterns or templates which he creates and then attempts to fit over the realities of which the world is composed. The fit is not always very good. Yet without such patterns the world appears to be such an undifferentiated homogeneity that man is unable to make any sense out of it. Even a poor fit is more helpful to him than nothing at all. Let us give the name constructs to these patterns that are tentatively tried on for size" (pp.8-9). [14]

This description underpins the ontological significance of the construct for KELLY, framing it as the most primary structure of going about the business of being human. In addition, it emphasizes that the construct can be adjusted to provide a better "fit" with reality if deemed necessary. The construct, therefore, provides a representation of the world that is then tested upon the reality of the world to determine the degree with which the construct is actually capable of predicting that reality. It is important to appreciate that a person's constructs

represent a transient take on the world, one that can be adjusted or even abandoned in the light of new and contradictory evidence. [15]

KELLY, thus, assumes that much is to be gained through also considering that which is different. He suggests that considering that which is different corresponds more closely with observations of how a person actually thinks. Thus, the construct in its basic form is a consideration of the way in which at least two things are construed as being similar while construed as different from a third. For example, KELLY states, "If we are to express a true construct: Mary and Alice are gentle; Jane is not" (p.111). This emphasizes the way that a construct is formed as a bipolar structure—gentle vs. not gentle—based on the common element of gentle. [16]

An example of a construct that KELLY frequently refers to is the common dichotomy "black vs. white." Through the lens of a traditional logic that has similarity as its focus of consideration, something considered other than "black" could only be "not black." However, for KELLY, the opposite of "black" for a particular person may be "white," establishing the construct "black vs. white." This construct may allow that person to bring very specific aspects to understanding; for example, the color of the sky, or even that person's mood. For another person, however, the opposite of "black" may be "Anglo-Saxon." This brings a vastly different perspective of the world to understanding for that particular person. These two examples highlight the value of appreciating the other or opposite when trying to understand the way in which an individual brings an aspect of the world to understanding. [17]

Beyond consideration of what the weather is doing or perhaps a person's mood, the "black vs. white" construct may seem to have limited applicability to other aspects of a person's life. KELLY termed those aspects of the world that are located within a construct—those aspects for which the construct has applicability—a construct's *context*. To continue with the "black vs. white" construct, as a vehicle to discriminate mood it is "a person's mood" that represents the context for the construct, while that person who uses a "black vs. white" construct for discriminating the weather situates "the weather" as the context for that construct. Here, it is clear the individual person creates and determines the construct itself and the context within which it finds meaning and applicability. [18]

3.2.2 *The construct system*

Elaborated in this way, the construct has the impression of offering little more than idealized conceptions with no connection to a reality beyond a person's constructions of it. However, through what he terms the *organization corollary*, KELLY presents each individual construct as comprising merely one component of a great, integrally related system of constructs, and in so doing seeks to close down the idea that constructs can simply "be tossed about willy-nilly" (p.15) despite being determined in every way by the individual person. [19]

Not only do individual people differ by way of the constructs they develop, they also differ in the way in which they organize their constructs. It is, for KELLY, the way in which a person organizes personal constructs that genuinely represents that person, as opposed to any individual construct itself. Further, the organization of constructs into a greater, integrally related system of constructs means that a change in one construct can be a source of change in other constructs and their relations within that system. Thus, each construct exhibits an ordinal relationship with those other constructs that are operating "in-series" with the construct in question. That is, each construct is at the same time subordinate to the construct(s) that determines it, while superordinate to and, therefore, determinate of other constructs. It is important to recall the individual to whom KELLY has deferred agency in the establishment of a personal system of constructs. Our greater construction system is, therefore, not a fixed entity resistant to change, but is rather, as KELLY identifies, designed for a person's convenience. [20]

When KELLY made it clear that one could not merely "toss" personal constructs around "willy-nilly" (p.51), he was alluding to what he considers an inherent stability within a person's construct system. Here, he suggests that it is the more superordinate elements in a person's system of constructs that ultimately determine those constructs that they subsume and, therefore, provide a degree of consistency to the broader system. KELLY uses the terms "core construct" and "peripheral construct" (p.482) to elaborate this notion of construct system stability. For him, then, "[c]ore constructs are those which govern a person's maintenance processes—that is, those by which he maintains his identity and existence" (p.42). Core constructs are thus considered comprehensive with regard to the functions they serve the person. They are largely resistant to change, thereby providing a significant degree of consistency and organization to a person's construct system. Contrasting core constructs with peripheral constructs, KELLY describes these latter constructs as "those which can be altered without serious modification of core structures" (pp.482-483). It follows, therefore, that adjustment to a peripheral construct is less complicated and has far fewer consequences than the adjustment of a core construct. All of this means that a person's constructions are open to varying degrees of revision and change. [21]

3.2.3 *Construct revision*

As has been mentioned previously, the process of building a repertory of constructs requires that each person test personal constructs against reality and adjust them in the hope of achieving a better fit. KELLY, identifying the construct as "a representation of the universe, a representation erected by a living creature then tested against the reality of the universe" (p.12), locates the construct as an anticipatory structure that anticipates the reality yet to come. The success or otherwise of this anticipation is dependent upon an assessment of "fit" with reality:

"When a person scans the events with which he is surrounded he 'lights up' certain dichotomies in his construct system. Thus construct systems can be considered as a kind of scanning pattern which a person continually projects upon his world. As he

sweeps back and forth across his perceptual field he picks up blips of meaning. The more adequate his scanning pattern, the more meaningful his world becomes" (p.145). [22]

KELLY recognizes that we would be "hopelessly bogged down" (p.13) without the opportunity to adjust our original forecasts and makes changes to our constructs in light of the "blips" or "validation evidence" (p.45) that he believes should be continually sought for our constructs. Such a practice, he suggests, "characterizes any alert person" (p.13). [23]

4. An Elaboration

KELLY's fundamental postulate on a person's processes being "psychologically channelized by the way in which he anticipates events" (p.46) and the subsequent centrality of the construct are a glimpse of a psychologically proactive individual. KELLY amplifies his fundamental postulate by way of 11 separate corollaries, including the *organization corollary* mentioned previously, that show in close detail the nuances of constructs and their roles in the entirely idiographic and proactive nature of *being* that we each find ourselves. While a close examination of each corollary is beyond the scope of this article, a cursory look at an additional five corollaries will emphasize the suitability of KELLY's position as a foundation for recovering a stronger idiographic commitment for qualitative research, as well as highlighting the possibilities that an understanding at the level of the construct offers in terms of a deeply idiographic and nuanced consideration of *being* human. [24]

For instance, by way of his *construction corollary* (also, via his *organization corollary*), KELLY establishes the psychologically proactive nature of the person by suggesting that it is the individual person who produces a network of constructs through which the world "takes shape or assumes meaning" (p.50). Importantly, however, it is not the substance that creates the network of constructs but the individual person. Thus, the *individuality corollary* indicates:

"People can be seen as differing from each other, not only because there may have been differences in the events which they have sought to anticipate, but also because there are different approaches to the anticipation of the same events" (p.55). [25]

KELLY quickly argues that this inherent "individual difference" does not foreclose the possibility of people sharing experience, a position that his *commonality* and *sociality corollaries* show. Before we can explore further what KELLY means by these corollaries, a look at his *experience corollary* is useful. [26]

The *experience corollary* identifies experience as a process of evolving one's anticipation of events. Commensurate with the psychologically proactive person that KELLY envisages, he suggests that the events of the world "continually subjects a person's construction system to a validation process" (p.72). The process of validation itself may reveal an inadequate "fit" between a person's anticipations and reality. The recognition of this poor fit, therefore, requires a

progressive and developmental evolution of that person's construction(s). It is the movement from an initial construct—found to be of poor fit—to a new construct through a process of "reconstruction" that shows what experience is for KELLY. He is clear that experience itself involves active mental processes. In fact, genuine experience is epitomized by the process of making something of the events of the world beyond merely the passage of the events themselves. The following passage is exemplary of KELLY's conception of experience:

"A person can be witness to a tremendous parade of episodes and yet, if he fails to keep making something out of them, or if he waits until they have all occurred before he attempts to reconstruct them, he gains little in the way of experience from having been around when they happened. It is not what happens around him that makes a man experienced, it is the successive construing and reconstructing of what happens, as it happens, that enriches the experience of life" (p.73). [27]

Thus, experience is the culmination of what is made of the events and a person's progressive revision of personal constructs. Recognizing that experience is the resultant effort of the construing individual, rather than merely a person's exposure to events themselves, we can return to the *commonality corollary*. KELLY argues the possibility of commonality between people based on their construction processes and not merely by way of their exposure to events themselves. What this means is that the degree to which one person can be considered to have shared experience is a function of how one construes personal experience as similar to the constructions of another person. This possibility of commonality, in turn, enables the *sociality corollary*, wherein KELLY suggests that to have a social relationship, people do not have to construe things as others do, but rather should gain an appreciation of the way in which another person sees things. [28]

5. Recovering an Idiographic Commitment for Qualitative Research

So what does KELLY's fundamental postulate and its elaboration or amplification through the corollaries mean for the development of a stronger idiographic commitment for qualitative research? What was sought was a theoretical position that embodies the core principles of the idiographic position and is capable of dealing with the subject matter at a particularly high level of abstraction—such as *qualia*. The person envisaged must be replete with personal agency and, at the same time, embedded in an inherently social world with other people with similar degrees of agency. We have suggested that the psychology of personal constructs suitably embodies these requirements. [29]

As an essential pre-condition of meaningful engagement with the world and those entities within it, KELLY situates the construct as the fundamental ontological structure of *being* human. He, in fact, argues that a glimpse at the constructs through which a person brings the world to meaning is a look at the *Self*. Being provided an opportunity to understand an individual at this level of abstraction is more than a look at how a person defines an experience; it is instead a look at the structures that condition the possibility of experience at all. Moreover, the

construct has been established as existing within a greater system of constructs within which superordinate constructs represent a greater degree of stability or consistency with a person's *Self*. Consequently, representing a person at the level of the construct means more than any doxastic representation contrived by researchers; it instead becomes a glimpse of the individual person going about the business of being human from the perspective of his/her "inner outlook." [30]

6. Conclusion

Qualitative research includes the theoretical foundations through which we have the means to understand the routine and problematic moments in *individuals'* lives. We have suggested that personal experience is unique and particular as a function of its very nature, making "unique" and "particular" experience the mode of a person's being. Despite what we consider to be an obligation of qualitative researchers to represent personal experience, we argue that the thematic approaches to understanding that permeate many contemporary approaches to qualitative research focus on agreement and generalization rather than the idiographic nature of experience itself. [31]

This being so, we suggest a return towards taking greater account of the idiographic nature of human being and, in so doing, adopting a more genuinely reflexive conceptual framework for representing our subject matter at the level of the individual. Here we have suggested that a genuine engagement with the principles outlined by KELLY's (1955) "Personal Construct Psychology" would be productive. A new framework for qualitative research also drawing from this tradition would be, we suggest, an avenue for taking a focused consideration of individual person at a level of abstraction consistent with the very structures that condition the understanding and embody the unique personal experiences or *qualia* of that person. [32]

Questions arise as to how this might work in practice. Following the lead of KELLY's personal construct psychology and, in so doing, contemplating the individual person at the level of the *Self*, undeniably lends itself to the single case study design. Indeed, if we are interested in coming to a genuine understanding of the routine and problematic moments in individuals' lives, or catching a glimpse of what it is like for an individual to experience a phenomenon, then moving in the direction of a case study is less a methodological choice and more a mandate of the subject matter we have chosen to study. An idiographic commitment also indicates some issues and parameters for subsequent analysis. More specifically, given that KELLY's model requires the individual to be genuinely able to bring the "inner" to understanding as an "outlook," a more sophisticated conceptualization of the nature of the dialogue between abstraction, thought, *qualia* and language is required.¹ This, as we have argued elsewhere, would require a hermeneutic

1 A long and complex philosophical history surrounds the links between language and *qualia*. While philosophical opinion is not united on the topic of *qualia* and language, the fact that each of us is able to be articulate about the *quale* of milk, as DENNETT (1988) notes, means that *qualia* are indeed within the reach of language. If this is so, however, the question for qualitative researchers seeking to genuinely represent individualized experience, is how to convert characteristics of human experience into items from which meaning can be made and shared,

turn, one we have elsewhere explored as the theoretical foundation of an approach termed *hermeneutic constructivism* (PECK & MUMMERY, 2017). Such an approach, we suggest, may involve one approach to redressing the problematic identified here and, in so doing, open an opportunity for developing a deeper and more nuanced understanding of human *being*. Within hermeneutic constructivism, a cogent relationship between language, and the structures and processes of mental activity that support the human comportment toward understanding is elaborated, as well as an orientation towards a possible praxis for the qualitative enterprise. PECK and MUMMERY argue that this theoretical position is an informative model for qualitative research that not only includes possible exploration of a person's experience at a deeper level of abstraction but also an avenue for overcoming the identified tension between the ideals attributed to qualitative research and its current foregrounding of models of analysis tied to generalization. The application of this position to deeply nuanced idiographic single case studies is the next step. [33]

References

- Allport, Gordon W. (1962). The general and the unique in psychological science. *Journal of Personality*, 30, 405-422.
- Amrine, Frederick; Zucker, Francis & Wheeler, Harvey (Eds.) (2012). *Goethe and the sciences: A reappraisal*. Dordrecht: Reidel.
- Barlow, David H. & Nock, Matthew (2009). Why can't we be more idiographic in our research?. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 4(1), 19-21.
- Bendassolli, Pedro F. (2013). Theory building in qualitative research: Reconsidering the problem of induction. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 14(1), Art. 25, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-14.1.1851> [Accessed: May 18, 2019].
- Braun, Virginia & Clarke, Victoria (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Brinkmann, Svend; Jacobsen, Michael & Kristiansen, Soren (2014). Historical overview of qualitative research in the social sciences. In Patricia Leavy (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research* (pp.17-42). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Dennett, Daniel (1988). Quining qualia. In Anthony Marcel & Edoardo Bisiach (Eds.), *Consciousness in modern science* (pp.11-21). London: Oxford University Press.
- Denzin, Norma & Lincoln, Yvonne (2017). The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In [Norman Denzin](#) & Yvonne Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed., pp.1-28). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Holloway, Immy & Galvin, Kathleen (2017). *Qualitative research in nursing and healthcare* (4th ed.). Chichester: Wiley.
- Holloway, Immy & Todres, Les (2003). The status of method: Flexibility, consistency and coherence. *Qualitative Research*, 3(3), 345-357.
- Kelly, George (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs* (Vol. 2). New York, NY: Norton.
- Kelly, George (1963). *A theory of personality: The psychology of personal constructs*. New York, NY: Norton.
- [Knoblauch, Hubert](#) (2014). Qualitative methods at the crossroads: Recent developments in interpretive social research. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 14(3), Art. 12, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-14.3.2063> [Accessed: May 18, 2019].

given that this work can only be an operation *with, in and on* language. This means that a researcher stands in need of a theoretical framework that unpacks the relationship between "experience," "world," "language" and "the individual." In addition, it is tantamount that the connections between the individual's experience and what is subsequently articulated in the dialogues of research are made clear.

- Lamiell, James (2010). Reflections on some neglected ideas about psychological measurement from the personalistic perspective of William Stern (1871-1938). In Aaro Toomela & Jaan Valsiner (Eds.), *Methodological thinking in psychology: 60 years gone astray?* (pp.189-208). New York, NY: Information Age.
- McWilliams, Spencer (2004). Constructive alternativism and self. In Johnathan Raskin & Sara Bridges (Eds.), *Studies in meaning 2: Bridging the personal and social in constructivist psychology* (pp.291-309). New York, NY: Pace University Press.
- Mey, Gunter (2000). Qualitative research and the analysis of processes. Considerations towards a "qualitative developmental psychology". *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(1), Art. 10, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-1.1.1120> [Accessed: May 18, 2019].
- Mininni, Giuseppe (2008). What is it like to be a person? The contribution of discursive psychology to idiographic science. In Sergio Salvatore, Jaan Valsiner, Sarah Strout-Yagodzynski & Joshua Clegg (Eds.), *Yearbook of idiographic science* (Vol.1, pp.249-272). Rome: Firera.
- Molenaar, Peter & Valsiner, Jaan (2008). How generalization works through the single case: A simple idiographic process analysis of an individual psychotherapy. In Sergio Salvatore, Jaan Valsiner, Sarah Strout-Yagodzynski & Joshua Clegg (Eds.), *Yearbook of idiographic science* (Vol.1, pp.23-38). Rome: Firera.
- Peck, Blake & Mummary, Jane (2017). Hermeneutic constructivism: An ontology for qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 28(3), 389-407.
- Peck, Blake (2015). The personal construct and language: Toward a rehabilitation of Kelly's "inner outlook". *Theory and Psychology*, 25(3), 259-273.
- Proctor, Harry (2011). The roots of Kellian notions of philosophy: The categorical philosophers—Kane, Hegel and Peirce. In Dusan Stojnov, Vladimir Dzinovic & Mary Frances (Eds.), *Personal construct psychology in an accelerated world* (pp.29-46). Belgrade: Serbian Constructivist Association, EPCA.
- Salvatore, Sergio & Valsiner, Jaan (2008). Idiographic science on its way: Towards making sense of psychology. In Sergio Salvatore, Jaan Valsiner, Sarah Strout-Yagodzynski & Joshua Clegg (Eds.), *Yearbook of idiographic science* (Vol.1, pp.9-19). Rome: Firera.
- Skinner, Debra; Valsiner, Jaan & Holland, Dorothy (2001). Discerning the dialogical self: A theoretical and methodological examination of a Nepali adolescent's narrative. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2(3), Art. 18, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-2.3.913> [Accessed: May 18, 2019].
- Toomela, Aaro (2011). Travel into a fairy land: A critique of modern qualitative and mixed methods psychologies. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioural Science*, 45(1), 21-47.

Authors

Blake PECK is a senior lecturer at Federation University Australia, School of Nursing and Healthcare Professions. He is involved in the theoretical development of new ways to understand human being for the purposes of qualitative research and founded *hermeneutic constructivism*, a theoretical position that is committed to understanding the idiographic nature of human experience. His main research topics involve understanding the life-world of children with a health related issue and their families.

Contact:

Dr. Blake Peck

Federation University Australia
School of Nursing and Healthcare Professions
University Drive, Mt Helen, Ballarat
Victoria, 3353 Australia

E-mail: b.peck@federation.edu.au

Jane MUMMERY is a senior research fellow in the School of Arts at Federation University Australia, and the author of "The Post to Come: An Outline of Post-Metaphysical Ethics" (Peter Lang, 2005), of "Understanding Feminism" (with Peta BOWDEN, Acumen, 2009), "Radicalizing Democracy for the Twenty-First Century" (Routledge, 2017), and an array of articles primarily concerned with the ethico-political possibilities of phenomenological philosophy, with a particular focus on revisions of its enlightenment heritage. She is currently involved in research deconstructing qualitative framings of knowledge and ethics, the democratic possibilities of new media, and the possible trajectories of post-Enlightenment applied ethics.

Contact:

Dr. Jane Mummery

Federation University Australia
School of Arts
University Drive, Mt Helen, Ballarat
Victoria, 3353 Australia

E-mail: j.mummery@federation.edu.au

Citation

Peck, Blake & Mummery, Jane (2019). Recovering the "Individual" for Qualitative Research: An Idiographic Approach [33 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 20(3), Art. 2, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-20.3.3231>.